

# MARX, HEGEL AND THE ORIENT

## WORLD HISTORY AND HISTORICAL *MILIEUS*

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### **Introduction**

In my contribution, I will firstly focus on the role that the Hegelian vision of the Orient plays in Marx's analysis of the non-Western world from the 1850s onwards. Secondly, I will concentrate on the use of Hegelian dialectics in Marx's late enquiry about non-capitalist societies, and semi-Asiatic Russia in particular.

It will be seen that Marx's major debt to Hegel no longer concerns the account of the basic features of Oriental society as an abstract category relating to a general theory of history. Neither is it limited to the extrinsic application of the laws of Hegelian dialectics to the concrete situation of single Asiatic societies like India, China or Russia. Rather, I will argue that what is ultimately at stake in such a relationship is the *intrinsic capability of the dialectical method* to take into account the multilinearity and discontinuity in history without being reduced either to absolute relativism or to determinism.

### **1. Hegel, Marx and Orientalism**

It is plain that Hegel is one of Marx's sources of information about the Oriental society from the early 1850s onward, that is to say, since Marx started serving as London correspondent for the *New-York Daily Tribune*.

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Actually, one of the first proofs of Marx's interest in Asian affairs is a letter he wrote to Engels in early June 1853, just a couple of weeks before publishing his first article about the village communities of Asia in the American newspaper.

So far as religion is concerned, the question may be reduced to a general and hence easily answerable one: Why does the history of the East appear as a history of religions?

On the subject of the growth of eastern cities one could hardly find anything more brilliant, comprehensive or striking than *Voyages contenant la description des états du Grand Mogol*, etc. by old François Bernier (for 9 years Aurangzeb's physician). [...] [H]e remarks *inter alia*:

‘[T]he king is the sole and unique proprietor of all the lands in the kingdom, whence it necessarily follows that every capital city, such as Delhi or Agra, fixes almost wholly on the militia and is therefore obliged to follow the king whenever he goes campaigning for a time, these cities neither being, nor indeed able to be, in any respect a Paris, but *being really nothing but an army encampment* rather better and more commodiously situated than if it were in the open country.’ [...]

Bernier rightly sees all the manifestations of the East – he mentions Turkey, Persia and Hindustan – as having a common basis, namely the absence of private landed property. This is the real *clef*, even to the eastern heaven.<sup>2</sup>

The question about the coincidence of Oriental history and history of religion recalls a century-old tradition, dating back to the first contacts of the European travellers with Asia, which unfold amid a mixture of ideas and theories about the Orient. On the one hand, the comparative method in the history of religion and the discovery of a set of connected Indo-European languages during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century gives birth to a fascination for the ancient Orient, serving an idea of European Renaissance. The Proto-Romantic and Romantic enthusiasm for the East as the source of all science and wisdom has developed along with the translation of Indian religious texts and the study of Sanskrit, acquiring the contours of an “Oriental Renaissance”, as defined in the classic study on European Orientalism by Raymond Schwab.<sup>3</sup>

2 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 2. Juni 1853, in *MEGA* III/6, pp. 180-184, trans. in Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Electric Book, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, vol. 39, pp. 332-334. (In the original, the quote from Bernier is in French, with Marx's italics).

3 See Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale*, Paris: Editions Payot, 1950, who

Until 1820, for equal and opposite reasons, Hegel does not deal with the Orient except for the philosophy of religion. Against the myth of the origins of the “Romantic Orientalist project” of “Europe-regenerated-by-Asia”,<sup>4</sup> he firmly distinguishes the moment of religious representation from that of the philosophical concept and confines the Orient to the former. As Ernst Shulin points out in his important contribution to understanding the place of Asia in Hegel’s theory, since the Orient has no philosophy yet, it can only be considered, at best, from the point of view of the history of religion, yet conceptually explained.<sup>5</sup> In his seminal book *Hegel et l’Orient*, Michel Hulin adds that the turning point in Hegel’s understanding of the East is the *Philosophy of Right*, where the problem of the Orient is for the first time approached from a political perspective and no longer from the point of view of religion:<sup>6</sup> i.e., Hegel takes the point of view of the State – or, to put it in the terms of his own philosophical system, he switches from the domain of the “Absolute Spirit” to that of the “Objective Spirit”. Hulin refers to paragraph § 355 of the last section of the third part: World History, where the State is seen as the content of history, the “*principium individuationis*” of spirit’s liberating movement towards self-consciousness, which will be the core of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

In accordance with the four principles of this dialectical movement (to summarize: the immediate identity of the substantial spirit; the ethical individuality as beauty; the abstract universality; the reconciliation of freedom and necessity, objectivity and subjectivity), Hegel lists the four world-historical realms: (1) the Oriental, (2) the Greek, (3) the Roman, (4) the Germanic. The Oriental one is described as follows:

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(1) The Oriental realm.

The world-view of this first realm is substantial, without inward division, and it arises in natural communities patriarchally governed. According to this view, the mundane form of government is theocratic, the ruler is also a high priest or God himself; constitution and legislation are at the

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borrowed the term from a chapter of Edgard Quinet, *Du génie des religions*, Paris: Charpentier, Éditeur, 1842.

4 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 113-115.

5 Ernst Schulien, *Die Weltgeschichtliche Erfassung des Orients bei Hegel und Ranke*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958 (I refer to the Italian translation, *L’idea di Oriente in Hegel e Ranke*, Napoli: Liguori Editore, p. 72).

6 Michel Hulin, *Hegel et l’Orient*, Paris: Vrin, 1979, p. 37.

same time religion, while religious and moral commands, or usages rather, are at the same time natural and positive law. [...] Hence in the Oriental state nothing is fixed, and what is stable is fossilised; it lives therefore only in an outward movement which becomes in the end an elemental fury and desolation. Its inner calm is merely the calm of non-political life and immersion in feebleness and exhaustion.

A still substantial, natural, mentality is a moment in the development of the state, and the point at which any state takes this form is the absolute beginning of its history. [...]<sup>7</sup>

Hegel's background as regards the defining political characteristics of the Oriental State, rather than being the spiritual representation of the East as sketched by the Romantics in order to build a rejuvenated self-image of Europe, refers to the construction of a political judgement on the Orient within a broader theory of society in general and of general social development. Both aspects contribute to sketch the features of Western *Orientalism*, which deals with a model of Oriental society that does not correspond to any concrete manifestation of it, but is rather counterposed to the Occidental society. In both cases, the Orient appears – to paraphrase the core thesis of Edward. B. Said's critique of the *Orientalist* tradition – as a European invention to build and support Europe's own self-consciousness and to justify the Western domination of the East.

In particular, the roots of such a theory of the Oriental Society lie in the concept of "oriental despotism", which, from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, European writers (including mercantilists, physiocrats, utilitarians, French political philosophers, Scottish moralists and classical economists) put together on the basis of travel reports and develop in the framework of sociological and political thought alongside the colonial discourse. In this respect, Hegel and Marx are both indebted to the tradition that identifies the Oriental sovereign as the sole head of the State, State religion and morality. To a certain extent, Hegel is to Marx merely one of the sources of knowledge about the Orient. While preparing his articles for the *New-York Daily Tribune* on the British rule in India, Marx collected a large number of notes from the writings of English travellers, historians and politicians – such as Robert Patton, Thomas Stamford Raffles, George Campbell, Mark Wills – in the section on India (including short excerpts on China,

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7 George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, trans. by T.M. Knox, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, London-Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1978<sup>2</sup>, p. 220.

as well) of his *London Notebooks*, which are about to be published in the new *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*.<sup>8</sup> But one of his main sources, as we have seen in the first quote, is Francois Bernier, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French physician and traveller who anticipated the debate among English writers on the existence of private property in Asia. Marx reverses Bernier's positive thesis of the Oriental king being the sole proprietor of the soil, negatively inferring the *absence* of private land property in the Orient.<sup>9</sup> During the early 1850s, Marx starts elaborating the notion of village life in opposition to the modern capitalist society by using India and China as the concrete manifestations of a determinate abstraction: the concept of an archetypal Oriental society, which survived unaltered until the Europeans came into contact with Asia through commerce (in the case of China) and colonization (in the case of India).

In his texts on current affairs, Marx basically retains the differences between China and India that Hegel outlined in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, when distinguishing Chinese moral despotism from Indian arbitrary despotism, whilst reiterating their common *immutability*. Many pages recall famous passages of the Hegelian *Lectures*: in the *New-York Daily Tribune*'s 1853 article *Revolution in China and Europe*, "the complete isolation" is set down as the "prime condition of the preservation of Old China".<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the article *The Future Results of the British Rule in India*, Marx states:

India, then, could not escape the fate of being conquered, and the whole of her past history, if it be anything, is the history of the successive conquests she has undergone. Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.<sup>11</sup>

8 They will appear in the volume 11 of the *IV. Abteilung*. Wolfgang Rein has already collected these excerpts in his PhD Thesis *Die Indienexzerpte im Heft XXII der "Londoner Hefte 1850–53" von Karl Marx*, University of Halle-Wittenberg, 1988.

9 Lawrence Krader, *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Sources, Development and Critique in the Writings of Karl Marx*, Assen: Van Gorcum Press, 1975, p. 86.

10 Karl Marx, "Revolution in China and in Europe," in *New-York Daily Tribune* Nr. 3794, 14. Juni 1853, in *MEGA* I/12, p. 149. But see also Marx – Engels, *Revue*. Januar/Februar 1850, in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue*, 2. H., Februar 1850, in *MEGA* I/10, pp. 219–220, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, p. 267).

11 Karl Marx, "The Future Results of British Rule in India", *New-York Daily Tribune*, Nr. 3840, 8. August 1853, in *MEGA* III/6, p. 248.

The Hegelian motives are evident: in Hegel's philosophy of history, the Orient is seen as having the paradoxical status of being *out* of history and the very *beginning* of universal history. The paradox is due to the point of view from which Hegel considers the question: i.e., the Occident, taken as the *result* of the historical development. Orient is a relative concept ("*kat'exochon*"): it is Orient *for us*;<sup>12</sup> but, at the same time, it is *absolutely* East since the present form of spirit comprehends within itself all earlier steps as single moments of the progressive self-consciousness of spirit. World history is a movement from East to West because it is conceived as the progression of the spirit whose substantial purpose is the consciousness of Freedom. Since in the Orient "only one is free" and the spirit has not achieved the consciousness of freedom,<sup>13</sup> the history of the East and the history of the West are simply homonymous.

With the Empire of China History has to begin, for it is the oldest, as far as history gives us any information; and its principle has such substantiality, that for the empire in question it is at once the oldest and the newest. Early do we see China advancing to the condition in which it is found at this day; for as the contrast between objective existence and subjective freedom of movement in it, is still wanting, every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually, takes the place of what we should call the truly historical. China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World's History, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their vital progress.<sup>14</sup>

The history of the Orient is nothing but repetition, whatever the case: the stasis of the Chinese empire or the chronicle of the conquests of India to which Hegel – and, to a large extent, Marx in his first articles, as well – reduces the history of those nations.

From this standpoint – from the point of view of *history* as philosophically conceived, Hegel is not just one among many sources at Marx's disposal, but an intellectual father to be reckoned with.

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12 See George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, in Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden*, hrsg. von E. Moldenhauer – K.-M. Michel, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1969-1979, XII, p. 134, trans. by J. Sibree, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, New York: The Colonial Press, 1900, pp. 109-110.

13 *Ivi*, p. 31 (trans. pp. 18-19).

14 *Ivi*, pp. 145-146 (trans. pp. 121).

The sentence “World history has not always existed; history as world history [is] a result”, that we can read in the last page of the *Introduction* to the *Grundrisse*,<sup>15</sup> looks like a quote from Hegel; just as the famous metaphor of human anatomy which explains the anatomy of the ape in the same *Introduction* can be read as a paraphrase of the same concept. The knowledge of contemporary society, which is the highest level of development so far, is taken as the starting point of any historical consideration; and the other social forms can be truly understood through a contrastive analysis only, by comparing them to the most developed.<sup>16</sup>

## **2. From Oriental Despotism to the Asiatic Mode of Production: Universal History and the History of Capital**

Both Marx and Hegel recognize the opposition between the political centre and the isolated villages as the key to Asiatic despotism and stagnation. This kind of explanation has been worked out in comparison and by contrast to the connection between civil society and political power in modern Western society. However, whereas Hegel focuses on the State, Marx concentrates on the material basis,<sup>17</sup> i.e., the mode of production of the village communities, whose self-sufficiency is ensured by the predominance of agriculture and the productive unity of soil cultivation and home manufacture.

These two circumstances – the Hindoo, on the one hand, leaving, like all Oriental peoples, to the Central Government the care of the great public works, the prime condition of his agriculture and commerce, dispersed, on the other hand, over the surface of the country, and agglomerated in small centers by the domestic union of agricultural and manufacturing pursuits – these two circumstances had brought about, since the remotest times, a social system of particular features – the so-called village system, which gave to each of these small unions their independent organization and distinct life. [...] [W]e must not forget that these idyllic village-communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism.<sup>18</sup>

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15 Karl Marx, *Einleitung zu den „Grundrissen der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie“*, in *MEGA* II/1, p. 44, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28, p. 46.

16 *Ivi*, p. 40 (trans. p. 42).

17 Karl Marx an Friedrich Engels, 14. Juni 1853, in *MEGA* III/6, p. 199, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, p. 347.

18 Karl Marx, “The British Rule in India”, in *New-York Daily Tribune*, Nr. 3804, 25. Juni 1853, in *MEGA* I/12, p. 171.

Marx's judgements on the "barbarian" character of the Eastern nations, scattered in his 1850s writings along with statements about the "fate" of the Orient and the "revolutionary role" of Britain in India,<sup>19</sup> have led to accusations of ethnocentrism, which I cannot discuss in detail. Parenthetically, it can be said that Marx himself was more than conscious of his provocation, as he confesses to Engels on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1853.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the more Marx became acquainted with the cruel methods and the "destructive mission" of the British government in India during the London years, the more his critical judgement becomes evident and unequivocal.<sup>21</sup> But apart from his private outpourings and the deepening of his knowledge of the situation in the colonies, Marx's ethnocentrism of the early 1850s must be put in the perspective of his own critique of political economy and theory of social change.

During these years, he reflects on the structure of the village communities at the "peripheries" of capital from the point of view of the capitalist centre, opposing the conservative economic and social relations of the former to the revolutionary character of the latter, where the socio-economic antagonism has been radicalised. Since the "village does not generate within itself the oppositions of the social classes, just as it does not generate within itself the production of commodities",<sup>22</sup> it cannot generate a *revolution*. The revolution has to come from the outside; otherwise, the life of the villages would go on with no significant – properly historical – change.

In this period, Marx deals with the problem of the progress of the "modes of production", starting from the analysis of the role of the bourgeoisie in creating the world market and in constantly revolutionising the instruments and relations of production, and "with them the whole relations of society" (as he wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*).<sup>23</sup> This kind of reasoning leads him to build his critique of political economy from the second half of the 1850s: that is to say, the investigation on the relations of production in the specific case of modern capitalist society, and precisely when the signs of its overcoming are emerging. For this purpose, Marx makes use of a "historical analysis" not to write the "real history of the production

19 See *ivi*, pp. 166ff. and "The Future Results of British Rule in India", *New-York Daily Tribune*, Nr. 3840, 8. August 1853, in *MEGA* I/12, pp. 248ff.

20 Marx an Engels, 14. Juni 1853, p. 198 (trans. p. 346).

21 See the *New-York Daily Tribune*'s articles of 1857-1859, collected in *MEW* 12-13 and *MEGA* I/18.

22 Lawrence Krader, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, p. 90.

23 Marx – Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, in *MEW* 4, p. 465, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, p. 487.



relations”<sup>24</sup> and certainly not an evolutionist theory of stages, but to grasp the specific difference of the present relations, recognized as historical. That is why the description of the Oriental communal forms he sketches in the *Grundrisse*, in particular in the section “Forms which precede capitalist production”, is a sort of *negative* description focusing on the *result* of the process towards the separation between the subject and the conditions of production: i.e., the “[d]issolution of his relation to the earth – land and soil – as natural condition of production to which man relates as to his own inorganic being”; and the “[d]issolution of the relations in which he appears as *proprietor of the instrument*” of production.<sup>25</sup> And that is why Marx initially labels the cases of non-capitalist relations in his time as “ruins”, “remains”<sup>26</sup> of other organizations of production that have been logically overcome by capital. Consequently, contemporary societies which differ from the capitalist one are seen as the *past* of the modern bourgeois society.

It is certainly true that the oxymoronic traits of what Ernst Bloch calls *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*<sup>27</sup> [the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous] and of the geographical attribute that Marx employs to encompass a broad category of past and present forms of common property lead to some ambiguity. Above all in the controversial sequence of the forms of production outlined in the famous *Preface to Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals’ social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.<sup>28</sup>

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24 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 369, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28, pp. 388-389.

25 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 400 (trans. p. 421). Marx’s italics.

26 Karl Marx, *Einleitung zu den „Grundrissen“*, p. 40 (trans. p. 42).

27 See Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, in *Gesamtausgabe in sechzehn Bänden*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1985, Bd. 4.

28 Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Vorwort*, in *MEGA II/2*, p. 101, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 29, pp. 263-264.

Despite, or precisely because of, its briefness and the allusion to the “Asiatic mode of production”, which is a *hapax legomenon* in Marx’s writings, this passage has opened a long-lasting debate among the scholars who have been trying to solve the ambiguities, or at least to clarify the different issues at stake in those few lines – a complex discussion, which is obviously impossible to reconstruct here. However, it can be said that the paradox of a geographical concept used as the starting point of a historical series is indeed the symptom of the complex connection of *abstract* and *concrete*, *logical* and *historical* in Marx’s conception of capital and history, as well as in the relation between *theory* and *praxis*.

To some extent, Marx is radically progressive. He firmly believes that it is impossible for the productive forces to stay still and perpetuate themselves eternally. Nonetheless, identifying the productive forces as the determining agent of the progress of production relations, and – mediately – of the so-called political and cultural superstructure, also means that the progress, although irreversible, does not have to be understood as absolute and unilinear in an historico-philosophical sense. It can be conceived as a contradictory history, both from an abstract and from a concrete point of view. The history of the *contradictions* between relations of production and productive forces, which can be *theoretically* and *logically* described as an irreversible series of stages, involves the concrete *revolutionary subjects* of history, which can act as drivers for historical change not in voluntaristic terms, but on the basis of given conditions which necessarily grow within society itself. In this regard, even the attempts of the colonies to resist British oppression, during the *sepoys* rebellions in India or the Opium wars in China, are not to be seen as “revolutions”, because their final purpose was the conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form.<sup>29</sup> In the colonies, the conditions that Marx identifies as the basis for revolution have still not occurred. As he writes in *Capital*’s first volume, in the chapter on “The modern theory of colonisation”, “the separation of the labourer from the conditions of labour and their root, the soil, does not exist, or only sporadically”.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the labourer has not reached that contradictory freedom that brings in itself the conditions for the socialization of the means of production and the annihilation of private property, so relevant for Marx’s general theory of historical development.

29 See Karl Marx, “Der indische Aufstand”, in *New-York Daily Tribune*, Nr. 5119 vom 16. September 1857 and “Die Geschichte des Opiumhandels” in *New-York Daily Tribune* Nr. 5438 vom 25. September 1858, in *MEW* 12, respectively pp. 285-288 and pp. 549-556.

30 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band*, MEGA II/10, p. 689, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35, p. 755.

Such a general scheme will remain unaltered throughout Marx's entire intellectual production. Its roots lie in the Hegelian concept of history as a dialectical development of historical possibilities, in contrast with the existing circumstances. However, Hegel conceives historical development as the movement of the spirit against itself through a progression toward the political society. He adopted the criterion of the different forms of State as the individuation principle of historical progress, whereas Marx seeks the active principle of history in the modes of production, which are the result of the way in which the subjects of production interact and relate to the objects of production and, at a certain stage of development, come into conflict with the existing relations of production. Concretely, he thus recognizes the *class struggle* as the driving force of human history. It is not a matter of "world-historical individuals" who "have an insight into *what [is] ripe for development*",<sup>31</sup> but of an endogenous movement based on given historical circumstances and progressively attaining class consciousness.

### 3. The place of semi-Asiatic Russia in Historical Dialectics

It is from this angle that Marx, from the late 1850s on, starts to recognize an "internal development" in the apparently stationary Russian society,<sup>32</sup> whose socioeconomic base is the *obščina*, a modified form of the "Oriental" village community; and he decides to further investigate Russia's inner transformation potential through the reading of Russian-language sources.

Like China, Russia has not been politically colonized by the Europeans, although capitalist production has progressively penetrated the Russian social system. Nonetheless, in contrast to India and China, Russia has the peculiar character of being "half-Asiatic",<sup>33</sup> representing the East of – in – Europe.

While Marx adopted the point of view of Oriental despotism, which can be partly explained by the lack of primary sources, on the one hand, and by the contingent historical situation, on the other, Russia was seen both as the bulwark of the European Restoration and as an embodiment of the concept of Asiatic society. Basically, it was kept out of history, just as it had been by Hegel:

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31 George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, pp. 44-45 (trans. pp. 31-32).

32 Marx and Engels, 29. April 1858, in *MEGA* III/9, p. 134, trans. in Marx – Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 134.

33 See Karl Marx, "The Emancipation Question", in *New-York Daily Tribune*, Nr. 5535 vom 17. Januar 1859, in Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 147.

We find, moreover, in the East of Europe, the great Slavonic nation, [...] [the] Magyars (Hungarians) [...], Bulgarians, Servians, and Albanians, likewise of Asiatic origin – left behind as broken barbarian remains in the shocks and counter-shocks of the advancing hordes. These people did, indeed, found kingdoms and sustain spirited conflicts with the various nations that came across their path. Sometimes, as an advanced guard – an intermediate nationality – they took part in the struggle between Christian Europe and unchristian Asia. [...] [T]he Slaves have to some extent been drawn within the sphere of Occidental Reason. Yet this entire body of peoples remains excluded from our consideration, because hitherto it has not appeared as an independent element in the series of phases that Reason has assumed in the World. Whether it will do so hereafter, is a question that does not concern us here; for in History we have to do with the Past.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Hegel, Marx is more and more interested in the future development, and engages in a discussion with the Russian populists about the following historical steps, especially from the beginning of the 1870s onward.<sup>35</sup>

The Russian intellectual movement is becoming aware of a turning point in Russian history, with the Russian commune still alive but under the pressure of capital. Some members turn to Marx to learn his opinion on the future of the Russian peasant community and on the theory that it is historically necessary for every country in the world to pass through all the phases of capitalist production, mentioned by the revolutionary Vera Zasulich in a famous 1881 letter to Marx.<sup>36</sup> Rather than being just the representation of the *past* of European society, the village community becomes a possible *future* alternative to capitalism.

The attention to recent Russian history and the contacts with Russian *intelligentsia* from the 1860s, along with the reading of anthropologists from the late 1870s to his death,<sup>37</sup> contribute to a significant increase in

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34 George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, p. 385 (trans. p. 363).

35 Karl Marx an Sigfrid Meyer, 21. Januar 21 1871, in *MEW* 33, p. 173.

36 Vera I. Zassoulitch à Karl Marx, *MEGA* I/25 (*Apparat*), p. 823.

37 See the notes from Lewis Henry Morgan, Sir John Budd Phear, Sir Henry Sumner Maine, Sir John Lubbock, collected in Karl Marx: *The Ethnological Notebooks*, ed. by Lawrence Krader, Assen: van Gorcum, 1972, but also those from Maksim Kovalevskij on the communal possession of land, in *Karl Marx über Formen vorkapitalistischer Produktion. Vergleichende Studien zur Geschichte des Grundeigentums 1879-80 Aus dem handschriften Nachlaß*, ed. by Hans-Peter Harstic, Frankfurt-New York: Campus Verlag, 1977.

Marx's knowledge of non-Western societies, and to a more complex view of history in terms of a multilinear development.

By learning about the history of the dissolution of the communal forms of property through the works of the ethnologists, Marx becomes more familiar with several forms of exploitation on the part of producers. He realizes that the history, or rather the histories of the separation of individuals from their community are long and complex, and concludes – with consequences for his theoretical framework and vocabulary – that behind and beyond these forms of exploitation there is not only a passive resistance, and the attempt to preserve old modes of production, but also the possibility of better conditions and an autonomous emancipation.

In the drafts of the letter to Vera Zasulich, Marx abandons generic geographical attributes such as “Asiatic mode of production”, “Oriental” or “Indian society”, and the corresponding political expression “Oriental despotism”, to adopt more neutral expressions as “primary”, “secondary formation”, “tertiary and other types”,<sup>38</sup> etc. Due to the historical circumstances and to Marx's degree of knowledge about the non-Western world, the first set of concepts – to use Lawrence Krader's words, even if not specifically referring to the letter –

had become too global, non-malleable, and insufficiently sensitive for the critique of capital, of colonialism, and of the development of capitalism in Asia, just as, paralleling these developments and determining them, the introduction of capitalist relations of production in Asia brought about the extinction of the Asiatic mode of production in fact.<sup>39</sup>

The penetration of capitalism in the peripheries of the world put non-capitalist societies in the spotlight: this empirical evidence urged researchers to consider the possible positive aspects of the backwardness of societies that were traditionally considered – i.e., in the Western historical-philosophical tradition – as being outside world history, and logically corresponding to the “childhood” of human sociality. Both Lewis Henry Morgan – the American anthropologist from whose book Marx takes most of his notes about ancient societies and American tribes – and the Russian scholar Nikolai Chernyshevsky – whose economic books

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38 Karl Marx, Lettre à Vera Ivanovna Zassoulitch, in *MEGA* I/25, premier projet, p. 229 trans. in Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road: Marx and “the peripheries of capitalism”*, New-York: Monthly Review Press, 1983, p. 107.

39 Lawrence Krader, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, p. 90.

lead Marx to learn Russian,<sup>40</sup> and through whom he becomes familiar with the position of Russian populism – seem to recognize the merits of “backward” nations. On that basis, they hazard a prediction about the destiny of their peoples that sounds like an extrinsic application of the laws of Hegelian dialectics.

Chernyshevsky deals with the question of a society’s need to pass through all the logical transitions of historical development in his 1859 text *A Critique of Philosophical Prejudices against Communal Ownership*. Although he declares not to be a disciple of Hegel (probably to avoid the Russian censorship),<sup>41</sup> he resorts to two principles of modern science that he identifies with German philosophy.

We were concerned with the question of whether a given social phenomenon has to pass through all the logical moments in the real life of every society, or whether under favourable circumstances it can leap from the first or the second stage of development directly to the fifth or sixth, omitting the ones in the middle, as happens with the phenomena of individual life and in the processes of physical nature...

Two whole printer’s sheets have brought us to two conclusions, which for any reader at all familiar with the ideas of modern science, could have been adequately conveyed in six lines:

1. the higher stage of development coincides in form with its source;
2. under the influence of the high development which a certain phenomenon of social life has attained among the most advanced peoples, this phenomenon can develop very swiftly among higher peoples, and raise from a lower level to a higher one, passing over the intermediate logical moments.<sup>42</sup>

Reputedly, Marx started reading this text at the end of 1870, and he must have been impressed by the way in which Chernyshevsky treats the topic, for he recognizes the advantages of the backwardness of the *obščina* both against its detractors in the name of the superiority of capitalism and against the defenders of a supposed mystical character of the village community. However, according to his repeated statements against any mystified form of thought, Marx might also have taken some distance from

40 Marx an Meyer, 21. Januar 1871, p. 173.

41 Guy Planty-Bonjour, *Hegel et la pensée philosophique en Russie, 1830-1917*, The Hague: Nijhoff: 1974, p. 207.

42 Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *A Critique of Philosophical Prejudices against Communal Ownership*, trans. in Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road*, p. 188.

the abstractly, pseudo-dialectical form of Chernyshevsky's argument,<sup>43</sup> as much as from the idealistic drifts of Morgan's anthropology.

Marx's attitude towards Morgan has to be considered at least as twofold, since he appreciates Morgan's discovery of the *gens* – the consanguine group descending from the same ancestor, seen as the basis of the ancient social organization, in which there are no private property, class and state relations – and makes use of Morgan's consequent history of the family – according to which the “monogamian family” is not the natural family formation, but the result of a long historical development – as a basis to criticize the ideological naturalization of the family in the works of the other anthropologists he read in the late 1870s, and to present the modern family as the “miniature” of all the antagonisms of society and the State.<sup>44</sup> However, he has reservations about Morgan's general theory of history. The latter's concept of development is an evolutionist account of the progress from barbarism to civilisation that all peoples should achieve, according to the “plan of a Supreme Intelligence” which Marx cannot accept, as the systematic omissions in his notes on Morgan's book silently testify.<sup>45</sup>

Against my interpretation of a silent critique of Morgan in Marx's notebooks, one could remark that he even quotes a passage of Morgan's *Ancient Society*, in a draft of the Zasulich-correspondence, to argue in favour of the maintenance of the Russian commune:

Also favourable to the maintenance of the Russian commune (on the path of development) is the fact not only that it is contemporary with capitalist production [in the Western countries], but that it has survived the epoch when the social system stood intact. Today, it faces a social system which, both in Western Europe and the United States, is in conflict with science, with the popular masses, and with the very productive forces that it generates [in short, this social system has become the arena of flagrant antagonisms, conflicts and periodic disasters; it makes clear to the blindest observer that it is a transitory system of production, doomed to be eliminated as soc(iety) returns to... ]. In short, the rural commune finds it in a state of crisis that will end only when the social system is eliminated through the return of modern societies to the 'archaic' type of

43 See Guy Planty-Bonjour, *Hegel et la pensée philosophique en Russie*, pp. 190ff.

44 Karl Marx: *The Ethnological Notebooks*, p. 120.

45 See, for instance, the Chapter 3, “Ratio of Human Progress” of Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilisation*, C. H. Kerr, Chicago 1877<sup>2</sup>, but also p. 563, which has no correspondence in Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*.



communal property. In the words of an American writer who, supported in his work by the Washington government, is not at all to be suspected of revolutionary tendencies, [‘the higher plane’] ‘the new system’ to which modern society is tending ‘will be a revival, in a superior form, of an archaic social type.’<sup>46</sup>

Marx must certainly have been struck by this passage, which he had already quoted in his notebooks.<sup>47</sup> However, if he completely agreed, he should not have written, in the same draft, that “the history of the decadence of primitive communities is yet to be written”, adding that it would be wrong to put them all on the same plane. Although he recognizes the theoretical possibility of future change as the survival of an original condition, he also denies it can be predetermined as a *fatalité historique* [historical inevitability], totally apart from the understanding of “all the historical twists and turns”.<sup>48</sup> After listing the factors that cause the duplicity of the agricultural commune, at a crossroads between survival and destruction, Marx writes:

[T]he ‘agricultural commune’ everywhere presents itself as *the most recent type* of the archaic formation of societies; and the period of the agricultural commune appears in the historical course of Western Europe, both ancient and modern, as a period of transition from communal to private property, from the primary to the secondary formation. But does this mean that the development of the ‘agricultural commune’ must follow this route in every circumstance [in every historical context] [*milieu historique*]? Not at all. Its constitutive form allows of the following alternative: either the element of private property which it implies gains the upper hand over the collective element, or the reverse takes place. Everything depends upon the historical context in which it is situated.... Both solutions are a priori possibilities, but each one naturally requires a completely different historical context.<sup>49</sup>

Rather than applying from the outside a general, a priori and unhistorical law to the concrete circumstances of the “real history”, Marx

46 Karl Marx, Lettre à Vera Ivanovna Zassoulitch [février/mars 1881], in *MEGA* I/25, p. 220, trans. in Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road*, p. 107.

47 Karl Marx: *The Ethnological Notebooks*, p. 139.

48 See Karl Marx, Lettre à Vera Ivanovna Zassoulitch, in *MEGA* I/25, pp. 219ff, trans. in Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road*, pp. 105ff.

49 *Ivi*, 224 (trans. 109).



is simultaneously trying – through the concept of “*milieu historique*” – to historically and geographically restrict his theory of history and to make it more responsive to the different concrete contexts he has been studying, with increasing depth, in his ethnological notes. In brief, he is trying to reduce the gap between the logical and historical levels, worldwide geography and the theory of history.

Even before reading the anthropologists in the late 1870s, he had already used the concept of “*milieu historique*” to defend his theory of history, as laid out in the first book of *Capital*, against the allegations of a Russian reviewer, who:

[...] insists on transforming my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the general course fatally imposed on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves posed, in order to arrive ultimately at this economic formation which assures the greatest expansion of the productive powers of social labour, as well as the most complete development of man. But I beg his pardon. That is to do me both too much honour and too much discredit. Let us take an example.

At various points in *Capital* I allude to the fate that befell the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each tilling his own plot on his own behalf. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated. [...] The Roman proletarians became, not wage-labourers but an idle mob more abject than those who used to be called ‘poor whites’ in the southern United States; and what opened up alongside them was not a capitalist but a slave mode of production. Thus events of striking similarity, taking place in different historic contexts [*milieux historiques*] led to totally disparate results. By studying each of these developments separately, and then comparing them, one may easily discover the key to this phenomenon. But success will never come with the master-key of a general historico-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical.<sup>50</sup>

The reference to historical circumstances, along with the use of historical analogies in an anti-evolutionist and anti-determinist way, reveal Marx’s effort not to abandon his historical and materialistic dialectics in the name of absolute relativism, but to repeatedly re-assess it in order to

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50 K. Marx, *À la rédaction de l’«Отечественные записки»* [Oktober/November 1877], in *MEGA* I/25, p. 116, trans. in Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road*, p. 116.

keep up with history and the heterogeneity of the real. From this point of view, the East is no longer an abstract geographical concept at the service of Western history, nor is it used in the interest of colonization or the capitalist penetration outside Western Europe; rather, it spreads in the more concrete historical *milieus* which can better explain world history. Ultimately, in Marx's last remarks on the subject, there is no more space for an "Orient" against the "Occident". This unitary image opens up to single contexts which have to be distinguished, in order to grasp the possibilities of common action and global change.<sup>51</sup>

The case of Russia represents the concrete collapse of logically different forms of historical development, whose progress cannot be predicted once and for all because it has to do with the role of the revolutionary forces as the collective subject of history.

In other words, the Russian *milieu* is a tangible manifestation of historical dialectics, which can only be explained in terms of revolution.

## Conclusion

With increasing clarity, Marx's theory of history takes the shape of an uneven and combined development, that grasps the accelerations, the interruptions and the breaks in the historical path. I dare say this is the main legacy of Hegel's thought, who describes the progress of the spirit in world history not as a "peaceful growth", but as a war of the spirit with itself. At the end of his life, Marx – after reading the results of the on-site researches of contemporary anthropologists, and having become familiar with a variety of concrete cases of non-Western societies – can no longer make Hegel one of the sources on which to build an image of the Orient as opposed to contemporary capitalist society. But Hegel's dialectics, in a demystified form, remains a common thread in Marx's thought.

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51 "This poses the question: can the Russian *obshchina*, a form, albeit heavily eroded, of the primitive common ownership of the land, pass directly into the higher, communist form of communal ownership? Or, must it first go through the same process of dissolution which marks the West's historical development?"

Today there is only one possible answer. If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russian peasant's communal land-ownership of land may serve as the point of departure for a communist development." Marx – Engels, *Vorrede zur zweiten russischen Ausgabe des "Manifestes der Kommunistischen Partei"*, in *MEGA* I/25, p. 296 (trans. in Theodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, p. 139).

To conclude, we can turn to Lenin (who greatly admired Chernyshevsky,<sup>52</sup> by the way) and his conspectus of Hegel's *Science of Logic* – “Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!” and “Breaks in gradualness!”<sup>53</sup> – to sum up the core of Marx's critical and revolutionary dialectics, as he himself defines it in the 1873's *Afterword* to the Second German Edition of *Capital*.<sup>54</sup>

### ABSTRACT

My article does not aim at a comparison between Hegel's and Marx's points of view on Asia as such. The Hegelian motives are employed to understand the place and the significance of the Orient in Marx's writings from the 1850s onwards. The more Marx learns from original and/or updated sources on the Oriental societies, the more Hegel's authority seems inadequate to provide a reliable and comprehensive account of their history and social organization. Yet his “spirit” still holds together the different perspectives from which the subject is approached by Marx (economy, history and praxis, above all). In other words, Marx's interest in Asia is here considered through the lens of Hegel's legacy in order to reflect on the endless effort of the materialistic dialectic to encompass the complexity of reality and global history.

**Keywords:** Asiatic Mode of Production – Russian *Obščina* – Hegel's Philosophy of History – Marx's Historical Materialism – Dialectic

### RIASSUNTO

Lo scopo del mio articolo non è un mero confronto tra i punti di vista di Marx e Hegel sull'Asia. I motivi hegeliani sono richiamati per comprendere il posto e il significato dell'Oriente nei testi marxiani dagli anni Cinquanta dell'Ottocento in poi. Quanto più Marx apprende da fonti originali e/o aggiornate sulle società orientali, tanto meno Hegel sembra mantenere il suo ruolo di autorità.

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52 See, for instance, Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered. What Is to Be Done? In Context*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006, p. 564.

53 See Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow, 1960, vol. 38, p. 123.

54 See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, I, *Nachwort* [1873], in *MEGA* II/6, p. 709.

Tuttavia, il suo “spirito” tiene ancora insieme le diverse prospettive dalle quali Marx affronta la questione (economia, storia e prassi su tutte). In altri termini, l’interesse marxiano nei confronti dell’Asia viene qui valutato attraverso la lente dell’eredità hegeliana per riflettere sul continuo sforzo della dialettica materialistica di afferrare la complessità del reale e la storia globale.

**Parole chiave:** Modo di Produzione Asiatico – *Obščina* Russa – Filosofia della Storia Hegeliana – Materialismo Storico Marxiano – Dialettica